

Occasional Notes
from the Cambridge Historical Commission

Mr. Lincoln Comes to Cambridge

Abraham Lincoln is much in the news this month, with new books and a major new movie. Long before he became President, he spent an evening in Cambridge.

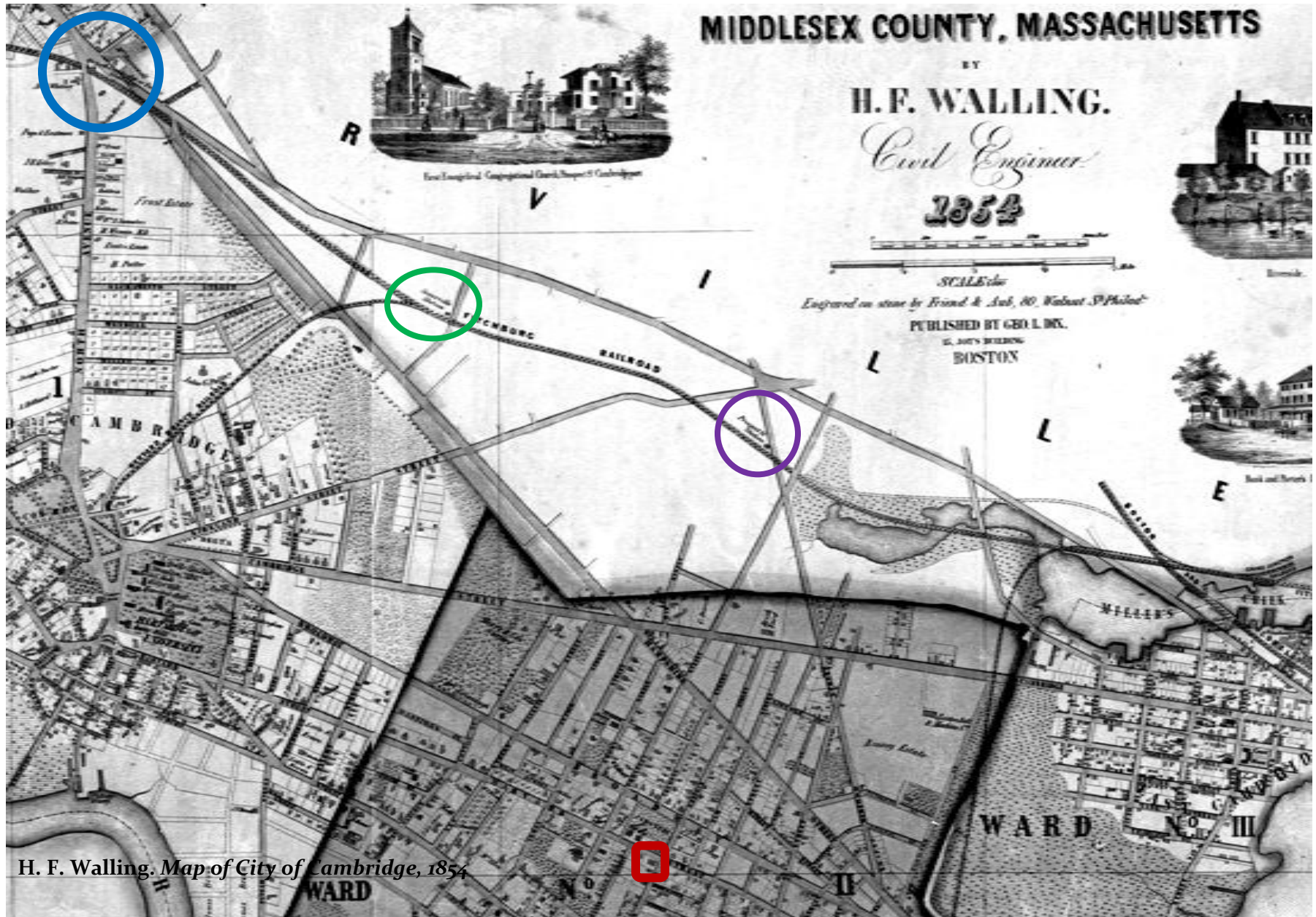
On the night of September 20, 1848, “a capital specimen of a ‘Sucker’ Whig, six feet at least in his stockings,” gave a speech in Cambridge City Hall in favor of the Whig candidates for president and vice president, General Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore (*Boston Atlas*). “Sucker” seems to have been a general term at the time for a Midwesterner, although its origin is unclear. (A commenter on an etymology blog noted that people from Illinois used to be called suckers in some neighboring states, perhaps, as another writer speculated, because Illinois men used to travel up the Mississippi River each spring to work and return home in the fall—Missourians called them “suckers” after a common fish that migrated in the same fashion.) The Whigs took their name from those Revolutionary American Whigs who had opposed tyranny; this party, formed ca. 1834 in opposition to the authoritarian policies of Andrew Jackson and his Democrats, supported Congressional over presidential power and favored a program of modernization and economic protectionism. In 1854, most Northern Whigs joined the newly formed Republican Party.

This “Sucker” Whig was the Representative from Illinois, the Honorable Abraham Lincoln. He had attended the state Whig Convention in Worcester on the 13th and delivered campaign speeches in Worcester, Lowell, Dorchester, and Chelsea. On the morning of the 20th, he spoke in Dedham.

After having run a successful race for the train departing Dedham, Lincoln returned to the Boston and Providence Railroad depot near Boston Common, arriving in the early evening. He walked across the city to the station of the Fitchburg Railroad on Causeway Street [now North Station] to catch another train. This one took him in a westerly direction, across the Charles River to Cambridge.

William F. Hanna. *Abraham Lincoln Among the Yankees: Abraham Lincoln's 1848 Visit to Massachusetts*. (Old Colony Historical Society, Taunton, Mass. 1983)

The Fitchburg line crossed Miller's Creek north of East Cambridge, then ran through Somerville to North Cambridge (and beyond). It is not known at which station Lincoln alighted: Prospect Street (purple circle) or Somerville (also called Park Street; green circle) stations in Somerville, or at Porter Station in North Cambridge (in the same location as today's station; blue circle).



H. F. Walling. Map of City of Cambridge, 1854

The Cambridge City Hall where Mr. Lincoln spoke was not the present City Hall (1890) but a wooden structure at the corner of Norfolk and Harvard streets (red square, here and above) built in 1831-1832.



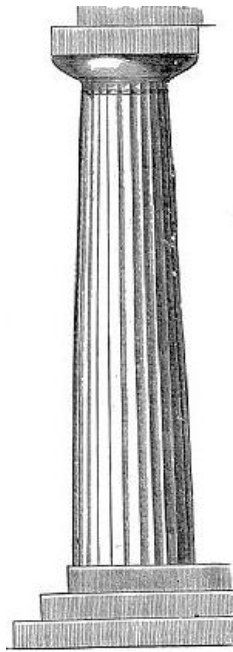
In March 1831 a committee of prominent citizens appointed by the town recommended “. . . that a town-house should be erected on the easterly part of the Almshouse lot in the parish of Cambridgeport, as more central to the populations of the town than the present house [in Harvard Square].” (Paige)

The plan for the Greek Revival style building was drawn by Asher Benjamin, and the first town meeting was held there in March 1832. The town house cost \$4,351.19, including furniture and fencing. No image of the building has been discovered but the specifications survive.

The house is to be of wood, forty-six feet in front or breadth, and seventy-six feet long, with posts twenty feet and four inches high, and the roof one fourth of its base in height; on each end of the building, in addition to the aforesaid length, will be a portico, of six feet in width, consisting of six fluted Doric columns, with an entablature and pediment.

Lucius Paige. *History of Cambridge*. 239-240

Although the building burned down on December 29, 1853, it is shown on the 1854 map (red square). St. Mary of the Annunciation church was built on the site in 1866-1868. The cemetery shown on the map was the Cambridgeport burying ground, now the site of Sennott Park.



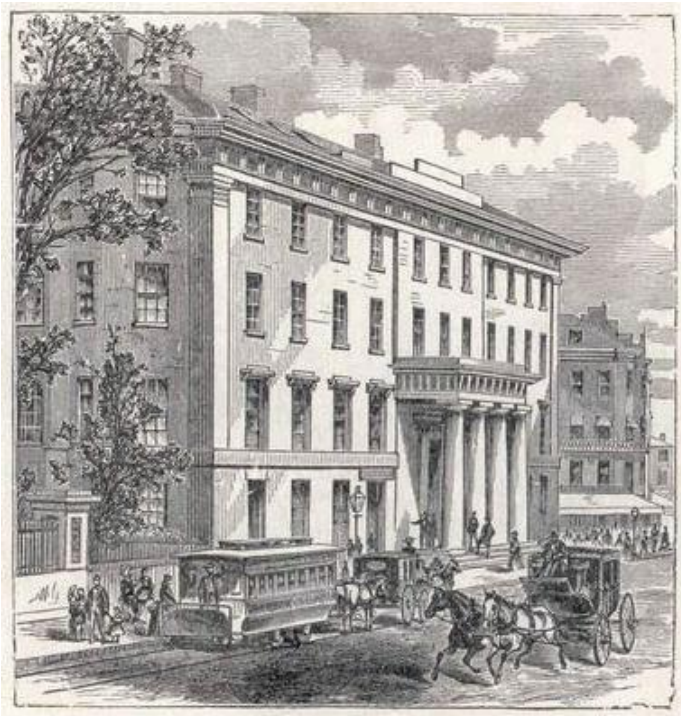
Local newspapers did not print the text of Lincoln's Cambridge speech on September 20th, nor have letters or diaries written by those in attendance been found, but a reporter for the *Boston Atlas*, a Whig newspaper, wrote about the rally enthusiastically.

A sudden shower had descended just before the meeting began, said the reporter, but it did nothing to dampen the enthusiasm of the Whigs present. It was, according to the writer, one of those old-fashioned Whig gatherings, which it does a true Whig good to witness.' He went on to say that:

. . . when the Old Cambridge [Zachary] Taylor Club entered the hall with a splendid band of music, and were received with cheer upon cheer, until the rafters shook and the roof rang, it seemed as if the building could not possibly contain the numbers who thronged to enter it.

[Lincoln's] speech was described as 'plain, direct, convincing . . . a model speech for the campaign.
Hanna, 66.

Hanna notes that, since there was no late train from Cambridge, Lincoln had to return to his rooms in Boston's Tremont House by carriage or on foot.



Lincoln made one or two more speeches locally and left for Illinois on September 23, 1848.

Taylor and Fillmore won the election.

Tremont House, Tremont Street, Boston, Mass. Undated image.